What knowledge - which relationships? Sharing dilemmas of an action researcher

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What Knowledge – Which relationships? Sharing Dilemmas of an Action Researcher*

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Taking as points of departure two concrete research projects carried out in Denmark, the article discusses some of the dilemmas faced by the action researcher while she takes turns with ideas of collaboration and community, both in relation to knowledge production, and in relation to the creation of research relations. It argues that an unfolding of a first person perspective can inspire deconstruction of constraining meaning-making processes and motivate critical dialogue about conditions for social change. It also suggests that sharing the dilemmas of the researcher with other participants can additionally open alternative tracks for understanding relations in collaborative research.

Key words: knowledge production, action research relations, subject positions, first person perspectives, theory-building

Introduction

Within action research you find a number of central ideas about cooperative inquiry,[1] promoting for example collaborative project formulation, collaborative knowledge production, joint ownership and equality in the relation between researchers and practitioners (Bradbury/Reason 2001; McNiff 2002;

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* We understand a dilemma as a state of uncertainty or perplexity.

1 Co-operative inquiry is a concept of Heron/Reasons (2001: chapter 16).

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Nielsen/Svensson 2006). This article will highlight some of the dilemmas we have encountered, while working as action researchers with ideas of collaboration and community. These dilemmas become intensified in a context of neoliberal management regimes at universities, and they should partly be viewed as a product of more general societal changes regarding beliefs about 'good' research relations and 'sound' knowledge production (Davies 2005). We see these changes challenging notions of collaboration and equality, embedded in action research traditions in particular ways.

The aim of the article is to suggest that a practice of sharing some of the dilemmas experienced by the action researcher in the process, while she or he is in the midst of these, can constitute a platform for collaborative learning for all parties involved in an action research project. We put forward the idea that shared reflections about explicit dilemmas related to questions of *research relations* and *knowledge production* will deepen our reflections about action research, and in due course contribute to a strengthening of this research tradition. We argue that making explicit *a first person perspective* opens up opportunities for reflection and dialogue among all involved parties, which simultaneously disturbs and endorses redefinitions of the notion of 'the common', so prominently placed within many parts of the action research tradition.

In the article we build on examples from two research projects, to illustrate how our own understandings of action research ideals were challenged especially in relation to traditional understandings of what a 'proper researcher' is supposed to be doing, and what 'proper knowledge production' is all about. We will point to the extent to which well-established culturally embedded understandings of what is adequate influenced both relationships and knowledge production in our projects, and we will reflect on the degree to which legitimacy and power imperceptibly informed our choices as researchers. We likewise engage in a discussion of how the unfolding of everyday working life in both academia and respective fields of practice establish limiting frameworks for the creation of relationships and knowledge. In fact, we consider some of these limitations indissoluble on the basis of an action research paradigm. Particularly in relation to structural power configurations in late modern work life, action research approaches have proven highly

contradictory. We find it necessary to undertake a self-critical discussion concerning to what extent a participatory research approach is desirable when working with change perspectives at workplaces in a context of neo-liberal restructuring. We are referring to the type of action research processes where participatory and dialogic processes are installed to modify work relations, modes of production and procedures connected to decision-making, and where the overall framework is competition and economic growth.

How to view the action researcher

Among action researchers, there exist various understandings of what is often called "the researcher's role." In our reading we have identified a continuum, from positions in which the researcher is seen merely as just another participant in the process, to positions in which the researcher is considered a primordial specialised process consultant – a problem-solver. In the latter position, the researcher is viewed as a developer of solutions, and is seen as the central communicator of research results to the members of the field of practice and outside (Svensson & Nielsen 2006:35).

Considering the complexities of human relations, there is little point in trying to position the researcher in one single position. When we look at our own projects, we see how we have taken on different positions at different times in the process. In our view it was space, situation, and relations that defined how we recognised ourselves and were recognised as researchers and how we participated. Our work is inspired by poststructuralist thinking, leading us to understand the subject as decentred, and to regard knowledge and power as productive and interrelated (Wright/Shore 1997; Søndergaard 1996; Staunæs 2004; Davies 2005). This means, for example, that researchers in the academic field would never unequivocally be perceived as the most powerful in a relation with practitioners from another practice field. Such a perspective places power relations in the dynamic intersection between social position, space, and subjective positioning, meaning that expressions of power have to be subjected to empirical, situated study, as they change. We are at the same time filled with an urge to understand the relationship between embodied experience, learning, and action from a more praxis oriented

epistemology. Deconstruction of meaning and critical dialogue seem in our view only meaningful if such reflexive methodological practices generate direction, opinion, and desire to do something with other human beings in concrete social contexts. It is exactly the basic interest in practice, social change and human development that has enthused us to work with action research.[2] We believe that the unfolding of a first person perspective can help us with this task, because it involves sense-making processes, the emotionality and concrete relation- making processes of the subject, as we will unfold later on in this text

As Svensson and Nielsen (2006: 35) indicate, action research literature contains many examples in which the first-person perspective is not reflected, neither in writing nor in other communication concerning knowledge production in action research. Previously, the unfolding of this discussion was almost exclusively found in feminist action research projects (McIntyre/ Lykes 1998; Berger/Ve 2001; Lennie et al. 2003; Gunnarsson/Hee Pedersen 2004). However in recent international action research discussions, there are a fair number of examples of this reflection, focusing on democratic dimensions of relationships (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004; Marshall 2004; Heen 2005; Burgess 2006; Gergen 2003; Gustavsen 2003). Simultaneously, self criticism has been directed towards the Scandinavian AR tradition, which has previously failed to come to grips with these problematic tendencies, and has not been self-critical in its handling of issues concerning participation and relationships (Aagård/Svensson 2006):

> "Action Research has seldom been organised as participation among individuals on equal ground based on free agreements and genuine partnerships. To do so one needs to develop forms of validation, which means methods which are able, critically, to illuminate the processes in the research activities including the interaction between researchers and other participants in projects" (Svensson/Nielsen 2006: 39).

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[2] It is clear to us that the fusion of two theoretical traditions that historically have had little to do with one another (as post structuralism and action research) push for a praxis of dialogue and reflection in the process of knowledge production as all basic conceptualisations connected to learning, acting, relating will be challenged by one another, in what we think is very stimulating ways.

It is by no means strange that deconstructions of the traditional research subject are often done half-heartedly. Gunnarsson and Hee Pedersen point out that the involvement of the researcher as a participating subject implies a deconstruction of a naturalised position of distance, so common in academia. A process of what can be perceived as cutting the branch you are sitting on "can seem extremely confrontational and is, to a great degree, a process which entails an individual researcher placing him or herself in a risky position in relation particularly to legitimacy in his or her own field" (Hee Pedersen/Gunnarsson 2004: 30; Pedersen 2007).

We have noticed that a considerable number of action researchers have engaged in the courageous labour of writing from the first-person perspective, and it is into this line of work we would like to contribute.[3]

Looking at knowledge, relationships and subject positions

Knowledge creation and relationship creation can be seen as a criss-crossing between participants involved in an action research project. Both concrete relations and knowledge are as phenomena both fluid and complex.[4] In action research, the production of knowledge often takes place in the context of collaborative practices and/or collaborative reflection related to these practices, either immediately or later, after specific acts have taken place (Schön 1983). Knowledge produced in practices in and between individuals is frequently embodied, and can be difficult to verbalise (Merlau Ponty 1969; Bourdieu 1997; Dreyfus/Dreyfus 1986; Callewaert 1997). You might be able to make an individual verbalise how she or he understands the learning growing out of a certain practice, but it is far more difficult to grasp processes of collective knowledge production. One reason has to do with a lack of language in which to talk these processes into existence. As Gergen (2003)

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[3] We would particularly like to mention Heen's article on emotions in action research in which she reflects over "the role of feelings in action research and why feelings have received so little attention" (Heen 2005: 263).

[4] The task of concretising and analysing the connections between knowledge and relationships is far from achieved in this article. For the sake of accessibility, we have chosen to break this article down into sections on relationships and knowledge, but we occasionally point out the incontrovertible connection between the two.

points out, we possess "an enormous rich vocabulary to objectify states of the individual mind but relatively few terms that bring into reality the relationship among persons. [..] There is so much to be said about relational realities, but simultaneously impoverishments of language in which to say it." We feel the challenge of qualifying action research's contribution to contemporary knowledge production is connected to a higher degree of methodological awareness, where dialogues are understood as a practice to be both built into the project design and placed in the centre of analysis in a systematic way. It takes a special effort to handle and understand dialogues as they actually unfold while research participants collaborate, and it involves development of analytical tools for understanding relational and communicational dimensions of the research process. As a consequence of our interest in, and concern with, collective research processes, we ask and discuss how bringing in first-person perspectives, settling accounts with images of the objective and distanced researcher, entails a possibility of opening alternative tracks for understanding relations in collaborative research.

Questions structuring our reflections on relations and knowledge

To be able to anchor our reflections about knowledge, relations and subject positions, we have used three structuring questions to highlight central dilemmas between research ideals about 'the joint' and our experiences as action researchers. They are:

– How are *relations* and collaboration understood by the parties involved?

– Which notions of *knowledge* are in play? – and subsequently

– How are different perceptions of relevance intermingled with the *subject positions* at hand to researchers and other participants respectively?

We consider, as do others, action research projects as being about people changing themselves and their life conditions (Reason/Bradbury 2001, Dick 2006). In order to understand the processes we were part of, we will set out reflecting about which *relationships,* it was possible to establish and maintain throughout our two projects. We will also describe the contexts and conditionalities of these relationships. We will focus on whom in the organizations

accepted to be engaged in the research projects, how they understood their own and our participation, and what conversations this encounter inspired. Where were these participants placed in the organizational hierarchy and how were their voices heard? What should we do when members of the organisation that we as researchers considered vital to involve had no time to participate, and how should we cope with the dilemma of having to accept the position of facilitators offered to us by the other participants?

Ideas of *knowledge* and relevance are active from day one when researchers meet practitioners, and knowledge is without doubt considered one of the most desirable outcomes of collaboration by both parties[5]. We have experienced that both researchers and other practitioners are interested in types of knowledge which make identification possible, and which produce relevant visions of possible future actions in their own fields of action. Sometimes it is taken for granted that everybody involved has the same understandings of knowledge and priorities, but our experience is that different understandings of knowledge make themselves visible in many different ways along the pathway of a research process. We will discuss how different ideas of knowledge consequently produced dilemmas and framed negotiations about content and actions in our two projects. We will, as mentioned, suggest how these dilemmas, if talked about, bear a possibility of defining/redefining notions of (relevant) knowledge, and maybe additionally the possibility of validating not only knowledge and relations but also actions by trying them in practice.

Thus, our main point in the article is that having as their points of departure dilemmas of the researcher, dialogues open up the possibilities for collaborative learning, and represent a possibility for discussing understandings of social hierarchies in research relations. We suggest such dialogues would strengthen action research as a (self) critical-analytical tradition, as they oblige the action researcher to become aware of him or herself as a co-producer of knowledge and relations.

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5 We recognise that simultaneously both parties strive towards doing something together that can change concrete situations in concrete local settings, our point is here that bringing in researchers creates a certain hierarchy between knowledge and actions.

We will briefly present the two research projects in which we have been involved, in order to later focus on the dilemmas that arose when we attempted to follow-through our heart-felt AR ideals in knowledge-intensive, modern organisations.

Presentation of two research projects

Example 1: Gender in Danish aid organisations

In the period of 2000-2003, Christina carried out a research project with the goal of exploring gendered meanings in Danish development-aid organisations. The project was directed toward NGOs, private consultancy firms, and DANIDA[6]. From the start, Christina was certain that the project should be as participant-oriented as possible. The project was originally formulated by a three-person team of researchers, but it only received sufficient funding for a single researcher to work for a year and a half and for a part-time research assistant to work on the project for six months.[7] The methodological framework was open and dialogical, containing a multi-modal research approach that included many different activities.[8] An important element of the project design was the "dialogue group," consisting of ten individual members from various aid organisations.[9] The dialogue group was meant to participate both in the problem formulation phase and in the interpretation of the data being regularly produced. One activity in the design was the holding of two work-

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6 DANIDA is the Danish national agency for development aid.

7 Christina was familiar with the field of practice prior to her project inasmuch as she had spent ten years working on gender, development, and organisation in Danish and foreign consultancies and NGOs.

8 The multi-modal approach was oriented toward sculpting a strong background of empiricism that supported or challenged the study's empirical portions, which were more central to the analyses. This included memory work, video sketches, workshops in which pictorial practices were undertaken (Hee Pedersen 2008 forthcoming), official meetings about gender and aid, etc.

9 This group was set up after Christina invited 25 men and 25 women from the aid world to participate, the idea being to form a mixed-gender group of around 10-12 individuals. These individuals would be either directly involved in gender work as project workers or would work at a management level on which they held responsibility for "integrating the gender dimension."

shops and the production of 'video sketches'[10] for debate. These 'video sketches' brought together material concerning Dutch and British organisations that resembled the Danish ones. The project's concrete output consisted of a series of four articles written by Christina, and targeted at the dialogue group and the research community, presentations at a variety of debates in the field of praxis; presentations at a number of research conferences; use of the 'video sketches' at public meetings; and, Christina's participation as a 'researcher representative' in the formulation of a newly-established Danish gender network in the world of aid organisations.

Example 2: Competence building at a psychiatric ward

In 2007, Birgitte completed an action research project at a psychiatric ward. From the start, Birgitte collaborated with three local practitioners who sat with her and her research assistant in a working group concerning the project. The ward's management initiated the project by seeking and procuring funding for a project concerning the communication of diagnoses and treatment possibilities to schizophrenic patients and their relatives. The agreement was that a working group would be formed consisting of three local employees (a doctor, a nurse, and a psychologist) and two researchers from the university (a researcher and a research assistant). All parties would spend approximately seven hours per week on the project. The management paid the researchers, but as it turned out, it was expected that the local participants would 'find time' for their participation by personally "restructuring" their working hours.

The idea was initially that all elements of the project activities – including problem formulation, the studying of existing conditions, the development of new strategies, and the testing of these strategies in practice – would be the working group's collaborative task. Expectations in relation to the final writing process at the close of the project were not clearly formulated at the

[10] The 'video sketches' were thematic video materials generated on the basis of interviews concerning experiences at British and Dutch aid organisations with involving the gender dimension on an organisational level. This material was used as a kick starter for discussion in Denmark, both during workshops and official meetings.

start, and it became Birgitte's task alone, with the other group members only functioning as eventual sparring partners.

Dilemmas Growing out of Ideas of Relations

To Establish a Relation

The participation of practitioners in action research projects is not just a matter of a practical agreement between the interested parties, even if many articles about action research make this moment in a project appear rather unproblematic. It seems obvious, but seldom reflected upon, that the questions of who participates actively in the research process, while it is going on, and how activities are carried out, turn out to be crucial for both the type of the relationship you as a researcher will be able to establish and/or enter, and the knowledge you will create in the process.

Today, the vast majority of research projects with a participatory profile need to access an organisation through some form of management. Already at this early stage, action researchers encounter a dilemma: Whose agendas should you follow when you are invited to create a solution to, for example, an organisational problem? On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine an action research project functioning without managerial backing, even though this is far from being the only precondition for successful establishment of research cooperation. It is often the case that some practitioners in the field are more engaged in the research than others, and these dynamic individuals turn out to become key agents to ensure the success of action research projects. In Christina's project, the only form of managerial support that the dialogue group's members received from their respective management was their ability to participate in three all-day meetings during work hours. That which gave the dialogue group continuity was first and foremost its individual members' own engagement in gender politics, and this gave the group loose legitimacy within their own organisation.

Christina had in her invitation made a clear reference to official gender politics and priorities in national development aid, to grant the research project legitimacy. She hoped thereby that she would be able to establish relationships with people thus positioned, as to ensure impact at an institu-

tional level. In any organisation a struggle for attention, legitimacy, and status take place over topics to be prioritised. When the topic of research is 'gender', the position of this topic within the organisation's own moral landscape turn out to be significant, and in Christina's case this became clear in the process of trying to gather participants for the dialogue group. It meant a lot who considered gendered meanings to be of importance, and who would take responsibility of communicating research outcomes into the organisation. In Christina's example sixty invitations were sent out to an equal number of women and men in central decision-making positions. Nevertheless, of those respondents who wished to participate in the dialogue group, all but one were women who had many years of experience of working with gender in development, and were keen to strengthen this perspective.

The human composition of the dialogue group – a central participatory dimension of the project – did not give added visibility or further integration of the gender perspective into everyday organisational practices in the development aid organisations. One of a variety of possible explanations is that the women who participated belonged to marginalised organisational positions, working with a rather tabooed topic where no men were involved. The lack of continuity in the group was a problem as well, if change in everyday practices was the immediate parameter of success. It was the most politically-engaged women who kept coming, and none of these were placed in vital decision-making positions within their own organisations.

In this situation, Christina's dilemma was one of how best to incorporate action research ideals of voluntarism and engagement, at the same time as ensuring that those persons of high-status positions would participate in the dialogue group. Her strategy of making an open invitation, trusting her appeal to responsible policymakers of the organisations, had as a consequence her failure to establish contact with those in powerful positions in their organisations, because they did not join voluntarily, thus weakening the project's potential for initiating changes in the organisation.

In the project at the psychiatric ward, it was the managing chief physician who asked three individuals with prior interest in the problem area if they would like to be members of the project's working group. They all agreed to participate, but were uncertain of what was expected of them. Birgitte viewed

this as a dilemma, felt obliged to motivate these participants to joint-ownership of the project, and repeatedly asserted that their knowledge as practitioners was precisely central to the project. Over the first year of the project, a consequence of this uncertainty was that Birgitte felt responsible for arranging meeting place and time, setting agendas, and generally acting as the axis of the project.

It might rightly be argued that the project at the psychiatric ward cannot be considered an example of 'genuine' action research, since the participants had not been involved in formulating the problem statement with which they were to work (Svensson/Nielsen 2006). Nevertheless, it has been our experience that there are very few projects in which an action research approach is initiated as a result of a researcher being contacted by a group of people who wish to establish collaboration in addressing "common needs arising in their daily lives" (Park 2006). Research accounts from AR projects often seem to imply joint-ownership of the project from Day 1. Birgitte's negotiations with management at the hospital had, as a result, a very open research design where the practitioners' knowledge and experience would inform all activities in the project. Such an approach differed radically from what the practitioners had previously experienced in relation to research, and their expectations were that Birgitte, as 'the' researcher, would enter the group to define the research design, the procedures, and the work division. When this did not happen and she instead invited them to joint discussions to form the project's foundation and guide its direction, it made them somewhat insecure.

It was felt as quite a dilemma that on the one hand, she had to work hard in order to be recognised as a legitimate and qualified researcher, and on the other had to struggle just as hard to convince the practitioners that the open framework of the project made it possible collaboratively to produce valid knowledge that could influence their own work practices, as well as those of their colleagues, as it had grown out of practice based knowledge.[11]

[11] Judith Newman and Steiner Kvale use the concept of communicational validity as a validation criterion focused on research practice (Kvale 1996; Newman 1999).

Gaining Knowledge through Relationships

A valuable experience in the two projects has been that the researcher quest to establish relationships in a field of practice offers unique empirical insight into the dominating discourses and work conditions within these groups and organisations.

For example, Christina experienced that the management of an NGO at first agreed to participate in the project, but later bowed out. The initial enthusiasm was on account of 10 – 12 women in the organisation pressuring management to support participation, as they considered the project a welcome opportunity to commit the organisation to gender work, and thereby strengthen policies of gender on the internal agenda in the organisation. Sometime later, management conveyed the message that they backed out, arguing that the organisation needed a period of calmness. Prior experience with gender research, they said, had shown that this type of research tended to spark organisational turmoil. A close at hand interpretation of such a move, which should of course be examined, could be that this refusal was an illustration of the status of gender topics in the organisation.

Collaboration with the governmental DANIDA (Danish Agency for Development Aid) proved impossible to even get started. DANIDA often underline the importance of collaboration with Danish research institutions when representatives talk in public, the idea being that qualified research results can lead to better practices within Development Aid Corporation. Moreover, this organisation has formulated a national gender strategy, which both private consultancies and Danish NGOs are expected to follow. Nevertheless, this powerful, governmental agent in the field was difficult to involve in the project. Christina, who was aware of the organisation's limited time resources, had merely invited six representatives from the organisation to participate in a three hour-long mini-workshop. It took ten months to set a date for the workshop, and when the time finally came to carry it out, it was in the middle of a round of spending cuts. As a result of crisis meetings, half of the participants had to leave after one hour. The planned workshop was a wash out. Huxham and Vangen describe similar experiences when "team-

members arrived late and others arranged to leave soon" (Huxham/Vangen 2003: 391).

Difficulties in getting various types of participation to function revealed impediments about the dynamics of gendered meaning structures and power. Arguments for not participating, protests against what was considered 'too direct' articulations of gender, and lack of responsiveness, act as clues that could be investigated in subsequent research on understanding the social conditions that influence how one can approach gender as a research topic in organisations. The 'sign on the body' (Søndergaard 1996) – the biological sex of the researcher – seems to be decisive for the way the researcher will move within a field of practice, and for the type of relations she or he can establish and develop over time.

In our opinion, understanding of a field and its borders could be enriched when the researcher's interaction with the field is subjected to analysis. If the group you work with, for example, rejects a participant-oriented approach to the analytical process, how can this reaction then be made subject to collective reflection, and can it inspire both relation building and ideas for further action in the research process? What would have happened if Christina had written to the people she had invited, reflecting upon the lack of male response and participation in the dialogue group? Would such an act have provoked reactions and could these have opened up for understandings of the field, understandings to be shared more broadly? Or what would have occurred if Christina had not so quickly "given up" on DANIDA, but had insisted in yet another encounter where her felt dilemmas were the point of departure for a joint analysis of time and priorities internally in the organisation? If the research subject has the courage to share her own dilemmas emerging during encounters with the field, then impediments can be studied in depth, thus contributing to joint reflections concerning future collaboration, procedures and research aims.

Knowledge produced by action research projects is incomprehensible when decontextualised from the relationships that authored its creation. These relationships need, therefore, to be visible so that the produced knowledge reflects the complexity and nuance-richness that characterises real life.

We understand that the above is but a rare analytic practice, because an action researcher will only unwillingly enter a situation in which she exposes herself and her project to failure, where she is not capable of establishing contact, interest, and practical impact. Heen is an example of a brave exception, in that she exhaustively describes her encounter with a field dotted with difficult-to-handle conflicts (Heen 2005).

When practice challenge ideas of equality in research relations

When contact has been established with the organisation, collaboration needs to be developed. We have been interested in understanding what it means for relationship construction and knowledge generation that it is most often the researcher who facilitates the research process. The researcher seems to be the person who feels that she has most at stake, and, therefore, she becomes the one who takes responsibility for maintaining the relationship on the track. One small example of this in our projects was that we both took full responsibility for forming the physical frameworks for collaboration. Lennie et al. explain that in their project some participants used the metaphor "mother" to describe the female researchers. They stress that this metaphor points to a supportive and considerate role, but it simultaneously suggests hierarchical connotations (Lennie et al. 2003: 71). We recognize the content of this metaphor in the processes in which we, ourselves, have been involved.

We would suggest that the relational care-taking dimension in research becomes a more prominent matter of concern when the researcher is female. Kenneth Gergen takes up the discussion about caring in his article *Action research and orders of democracy*. He merges constructionism and action research, and suggests a strong relational orientation to the creation of meaning and its subsequent consequences for the view on democracy in research relations. He states that the challenge of sustaining life giving traditions has been sadly neglected in research, and he explains it partly by its situatedness in cultural arenas to be found far from traditional academic scholarship (Gergen 2003: 39-40). We propose that a gender analysis of power is quite necessary to understand this process of 'othering' the relational collective, normative, and caring aspects of research.

Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, talking from what we identify as a more Habermasian understanding of the encounter, have produced a fine formulation, in which the dialogical aspect is connected to questions of caring for one another within a relationship. They define dialogue as "an exploratory conversation in which the partners jointly strive to achieve a better understanding or to become wiser together. It is characterized by sharing, daring and caring. Sharing meaning that all partners should willingly share their knowledge with other participants. Daring means that they are willing to run a risk and question their own and others' basic assumptions or self-referentiality. Caring means that the exploratory mood is based on an honest and forthright intent towards others" (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004: 373).

We likewise recognise ideals of community and mutual respect as relevant guiding 'principles' in our own efforts to establish dialogues in research. Although our two projects differed on a number of salient points, we have carried with us the above ideas about egalitarian participation in collaborative processes, – in other words ideas of processes that strive to achieve relational equality. We viewed specific actions and the research process in general as matters of collective concern, and we hoped, as researchers, to make available to 'the other' a position where we would be able to collaborate on equal terms (see Gudiksen 2004: 25). We both felt that learning primarily takes place *via* action and within relationships, an understanding we have found in action research. Without learning, there can be no action research as Lewin formulated it (1946). To be in a relationship and to insist on dialogue takes for granted, as Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen note, a desire to contribute on the part of both parties to work collectively, a wish to attain a better understanding or to become wiser together. A precondition is that the involved parties wish to work with one another, and this is not always the case, for example, when participant-oriented research is done in organisations today. It could be argued that it is not always just a question of preconditions, but that this 'collective want' first becomes a reality through actions unfolded by the two parties in collaboration.

When both of us navigated within the relationships doing collaborative activities, and when we evaluated whether or not we had been 'successful' in creating moments of genuine collaboration, we see now more clearly that we

have worked within a much too idealistic, but at the same time invisible, framework. We had not made our partnership ideal clear to the participants; much less did we engage in dialogue about it with them. When we now look back on our work, it strikes us just how much time we spent trying to consider how we best could communicate with the other participants, in order to achieve the sorts of relations that accorded best with our own transformational ideals, and within which we wished to keep working. We believe relating strategically to relational methods presents a great risk of closing down relational innovation with other participations, whereas our desire actually is to enhance opportunities for encountering "the other."

A good example of this lack of clarity is when Birgitte insisted that the project at the psychiatric ward neither be guided by the testing of previously-formulated hypotheses nor that it be contained within a previously-formulated theoretical frame of reference. Birgitte presented the epistemological framework as open and pragmatic, even though her assumptions about language, relations, and power as constituting was a basic theoretical reference point from which she did not deviate. This reference point, furthermore, was never made subject to dialogue, because Birgitte considered that its explication would be distracting for the local practitioners.

These contradictions became apparent on a thematic mid-way evaluation in Birgitte's project in which Christina, as a colleague of Birgitte's, had been invited to assist the working group's reflections about both previous and future collaboration. Here, Birgitte experienced that the local practitioners were far braver than she was at formulating thoughts and feelings about the project and the collaboration. She had difficulty setting aside her leadership role in relation to the procedures, and when she did so, she expressed herself meekly because she felt she belonged to the group solely in the role of researcher. She had to admit that she was unable to confront the local practitioners with her feelings about their participation, on account of her being incapable of doing so openly. This sort of situation makes us recognise the influential role played by the researcher's own social skills, and the challenges involved in taking on seriously what a first person perspective would imply. In this situation Birgitte reflected that too many emotions were involved for her to shift her position within the group without having a negative

effect on future project activities. On this same theme day, the group discussed working methods, and here, it was abundantly clear that the local practitioners did not desire the kind of democratic equality she did. One participant went so far as to say, "I want to be a passenger who can rely on both of you as chauffeurs," which showed that Birgitte's expectations of egalitarian relations had been formulated by the researchers, and not discussed and definitely not taken on by the other participants in the project.

Birgitte's dilemma became one of striving for egalitarian relations based on her own research ideals, and of relating strategically to the local practitioners situating herself in a privileged position from where to 'judge' the situation. She was the one who evaluated "what they could bear hearing", and how much she could permit herself to say as an individual who had, for example, misgivings or a dislike for particular collaborative situations. She alone would appraise how much she could risk exposing herself without damaging future collaboration, and she considered how to ensure that her research strategy remained intact, while maintaining continued legitimacy as a researcher and with main responsibility for the research outcomes, as she was after all getting paid for her contribution.

For Christina and her research assistant, the dilemma looked a bit different. As they had not been hired to carry out a specific task it was easier to view themselves as practitioners, encountering other practitioners of equal status as themselves. They were partners that even shared interests in altering gender relations. Christina had more than 10 years of professional background within the field of Development Corporation, and she therefore felt quite familiar with the logics of the participants. She expected them to recognise her as a legitimate, knowledgeable and equal-status participant. The reactions of the participants in the dialogue group showed, however, that her experiential horizon in their field of practice was now being replaced with expectations connected to her position as a researcher. The participants saw her role as that of an external academic, and expected to be presented with analyses, conclusions, and tangible tools and devises for implementing direct change in their organisations. In retrospect, we consider Christina's understandings of the relationship as naive. To a far greater degree than she wished, the research's progression and the relationships/division of labour

became defined by her acting as a third-party, especially inasmuch as the participants formulated this position for her, and expected her to step into it.

The practitioners saw the project as an invitation to participate in something that did not require much work on their parts. Christina and her research assistant were expected to be responsible for organising joint activities, for planning, and for maintaining contact between dialogue members and the research project. The responsibility for the process was not undertaken collectively – the participants participated as guests and not as partners. To all appearances, Christina held a position of control, but it quickly became apparent that she needed the dialogue group more than the group needed her. The division of labour which she had anticipated as based on ideas about common tasks to be developed through joint discussion and joint responsibility, was rejected and a process where she as researcher, was expected to deliver frameworks, agendas, and analytical arguments that could inform the practitioners' practice was taking place, partly due to the very limited timeframe of the dialogue group.

To put it bluntly, we both used our social skills to construct relationships in which we were viewed as individuals who were professionally competent to establish projects with a theoretical perspective, in accordance with our own normative ideals of democracy and participation. The dilemma we came to experience here was that our ideals of participation, joint responsibility, and egalitarianism could not even be discussed, explored and brought into practice, because we did not dare to make them explicit. The ideals became implicit expectations from the researchers to the other participants.

Different cultures, different perceptions of relevance

Birgitte had imagined that the project would involve the participants in the drawing of conclusions, and in the formulation of plans for future action at the hospital. The hospital was, nevertheless, dominated by a diagnostic and fault-finding culture, making it unusual to engage in collaborative dialogue. Not all participants were accustomed to being invited into discussions, expected to hold opinions, and invited to take part of decision-making. Birgitte experienced the environment as one that was extremely closed and almost

hostile to joint reflection. The organisational culture was very much one in which communication took place through the medium of individuals filing in reports. Everyone could report what they had observed and under which conditions, but very few asked "Why?" or "Have you tried another approach?" These sorts of questions would easily be interpreted as expressions of criticism, and there seemed to be little tradition in the field of managing criticism.

The above-mentioned organisational culture meant that Birgitte often felt herself emotionally drained and plagued by professional doubts as to the existential justification of the project. Had she not had the possibility of hiring a research assistant, the project would probably never have been completed. Together, the two researchers studied the working culture, and actively, through their own practices, insisted on introducing research-based approaches to collaboration and communication, approaches that diverged radically from the prevalent ones at the hospital.

In the above mentioned example, an apparent conflict of interests occurs based on the existence of different logics and practices between the research field and the field of other practitioners. 'Conflict of interest-issues' involve not only relations between the researcher and a practice field, but can obviously also be found among participants from the same organisation, and these may relate quite differently to the research process. The question of conflicting 'we's" is an aspect of action research processes that holds great possibilities for analysis, if made explicit as a topic of reflection.

We have, in our action research readings, encountered different tendencies in the reporting of action research projects. Some projects simply speak of the project being operated by a "we", merging researchers and practitioners into a single body that work on one case: In other words, what we talk of is the so-called 'common third' (Husted/Tofteng 2005). In other cases, a distinction is made between "us" and "them", with the practitioners being described as a homogenous group. As, for example, we too have done, when we refer to "the practitioners" above. Even when researchers and practitioners are contributing to a common cause, they still tend to position one another as fundamentally different groups, – as the binary other. Homogenisation is practiced even though we should clearly see the relevance of making a differentiation

between the doctor, the psychologist, and the nurse in Birgitte's project. In Christina's case it would have seemed reasonable to explore the importance of differences in the dialogue group, asking for example who heads of department were and who were employees at 'ground level', and subsequently work actively with the consequences of different social positions.[12]

It is equally difficult to understand and write about the complexities of the concrete relationships created during the research process. As we see it the challenge is to walk the line between talking about either the all-encompassing "we" or the polarising "us" and "them". A precondition for taking on this challenge is daring to embark upon a deconstruction of understandings concerning the nature of 'the proper' research relationships and 'proper' knowledge forms. This requires open communication about more than just ideals of democracy, equality and community. It also requires that we engage in a dialogue about conflicting interests for which there is little tradition in Denmark. Discussion of conflicts of interests are in Denmark often considered out-dated, implying disagreement, old-fashionedness, socialism and an unwillingness to communicate (Nielsen/Svensson 2006: 33).[13]

In his attempt to rethink democracy, Gergen finds action research to hold powerful potentials. He states that "constructionalist dialogues give place to all at the table, but do not provide a menu" referring to the lack of commitment to concrete visions of social change in social constructionism (Gergen 2003: 44). We therefore include his discussion on democracy and human relations, to see if it can enlighten some of the dilemmas we are struggling with especially when it comes to the handling of power within research relationships.

His main point is that research methods should be connected to broader visions of human functioning, and that methodology should be understood as a process of continuous reflection and enrichment of participating parties in a research process.

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12 Olav Eikeland uses an overview article to discuss this issue (Eikeland 2006).

13 In Denmark, discourses on dialogue, collaboration, and appreciative inquiry possess a high degree of legitimacy in organisational literature.

Our experiences suggest that it is important for researchers to think in terms of collective, dialogical learning processes when we enter into and execute action research projects. It is, as Gergen proposes, important to develop a language to capture the relational realities, as the collective wordings we use to describe and analyse relational processes only recirculate visions of individualism by simply transferring them to another level (Gergen 2003: 44).

In Birgitte's project, working with another research partner made it possible from time to time to practice constructive and productive dialogues, inviting the other practitioners to participate in them. Bjørn Gustavsen draws on the term "social capital" as a central analytical concept when he writes about collaborative action research projects (Gustavsen 2003). It is moreover difficult to transform action research into practice if you are the only researcher. We consider that having more than one researcher involved in the same project is of enormous significance. In a situation where a group works with only one researcher, it is a lot easier to fall into simple dualisms of researcher/participants relations. Communities of practice are vital to knowledge production and the creation of life-giving relations – also in the case of researchers. In this way, being two made it possible for Birgitte and her colleague to illustrate and practice unconventional communication forms which created legitimacy, hope and trust in the wider research relationships.

In the project at the hospital, the researchers found that merely by being two and different from one another, made them able to contribute to changes in the field. Through their own practices they were able to demonstrate new modes of communication with which the local practitioners could engage, and by which they could be inspired. The participants talked about how they felt, as if they had been invited into a new type of relation, and they felt that a new realm of relational possibilities opened up during the course of their interactions. Peter Reason states that the introduction of new forms of communication can be of greater importance than the concrete product of the action research process itself (Reason 2006:163).

Research relations and work conditions of participants

Our projects bore witness to how new tendencies in public management can make a substantial impact on employees' concrete working conditions. This situation creates very real dilemmas when it comes to the ways and the extent to which practitioners are willing and able to engage in research. It thus acts as a limiting factor on relationship creation (Åkerstrøm/Born 2001; Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006; Davies 2006, Hee Pedersen 2007). A clear indicator of time constraints and forced organisational change became evident to Christina early in the project, when she dealt with an NGO that had been given the managerial green light to participate in her project. Later, she was contacted by another NGO that was interested in participating. When time came for the project to begin, she spoke with the management of the first NGO again to confirm their participation. The representative replied, "Oh, we'd be very glad to get out of this. It'd be great if we didn't have to be involved. All of my employees have been on my back about this commitment. They think it sounds interesting enough, but they've just been assigned this and this and this and this. They would've liked to have been asked ahead of time, and they don't want to take part in yet another change project at their workplace. They don't want to spend any more time on all this organisational development work. Even though they think it's really exciting and everything, they feel they have so big of a workload already that they'd rather not take part." Christina had neglected to think about the employees when she had accepted the management's answer as a "yes," yet the management's approval had obviously sparked protest and resistance among the employees, who had never been consulted.

Similarly, time and resources played a significant role in Birgitte's research at the psychiatric ward. Birgitte was not initially aware that the employees and management had not come to an agreement over time investment during the project period. Only after working in the project group for several months, did the employees contact the management about an experienced feeling of time pressure due to participation in the project. The management responded more or less directly that "the employees would have to find time

by doing a bit of restructuring." The result was that two of the practitioners undertook this 'restructuring', while the last practitioner simply withdrew from the group, because sporadic participation was even worse than no participation at all. As time went on, the local practitioners managed to dodge taking on new assignments because of their being part of the project, but responsibility for achieving this was theirs' alone.

As regards the final phases of project work, our experiences also show that questions concerning participation in communication of research results can quickly become an issue of the resources at hand. It may not be entirely coincidental that Christina found resource negotiations to be quite transparently formulated when she sought to obtain access to partially and fully privately-financed aid organisations whereas, in Birgitte's encounter with the public health sector, budgets and resources were never mentioned, there instead being a not verbalised expectation that employees participating could always work a bit harder. The dilemma, in any case, hinges on the fact that the more an action researcher insists on joint knowledge production, the more she can be pressuring workers whose work lives were stressful to begin with.[14]

We claim that the character of involvement will depend on the organisation you work with – it will always be context-dependent. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen delve into the discussion concerning dilemmas of participation and involvement, pointing out that involvement is experienced both as a constructive challenge, and an activity that at times implies misuse of already-engaged employees (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2006:164).

We have offered a series of examples of the sorts of dilemmas that arose during our work in research designs, that were informed by ideals of democratic relations between researchers and practitioners. There turned out to be big differences between what the participants expected of their own involvement in the projects and the relationships that were created in the wake of the projects' activities. We possessed neither sufficient time, bravery nor clarity

[14] Anne Inga Hilsen discusses this issue in her article, "And they shall be known by their deeds", arguing for "piecemeal victories" as a means of tackling the quandary (Hilsen 2006).

to establish the type of dialogue that we propose as desirable in this article. If we had had a more clear vision of which ideals we so desperately wanted our projects to fit into, or if we had been aware of our own mechanisms while making "them" and "us" positions, then our practice and analysis would have revealed more about lived research experiences. As we have shown, the action researcher's dilemmas consist of the fact that a project that strives after democratic relations and equality in practice can be interpreted in the opposite way by the employees, who, for example, might feel that the management is forcing something on them.

The above issue is closely-connected to understandings of joint knowledge production. Additionally, so far as knowledge production is concerned, none of us adequately made explicit our understandings and expectations in relation to our own perceptions of knowledge. We will now discuss this issue with greater thoroughness.

Dilemmas growing out of understandings of knowledge

In interactive research, where researchers collaborate with groups outside the university, one can ask to what extent it is even possible to bridge logics between different fields of praxis. What happens when you as researcher pass into the normative system of another field, its foundations and epistemological framework? To what extent must the researcher change language when she or he shifts from one logic to another? And what knowledge do such movements produce? Will one field's logic always "overrule" that of the other, or are they bound to enter negotiations or fights over legitimacy? Will that which one logic considers legitimate and useful knowledge, tend to be in opposition to that of the other? Or should these quandaries about the encounters be viewed differently? Questions like these have accompanied us in our reflections and discussions about our knowledge production, and we wish to discuss them in the following section of this text.

Joint knowledge production?

We believe that most researchers link good research with the experience of widening our understanding of the world. We take note of things and under-

stand them in ways that we had not previously thought possible. Or we suddenly re-discover things we had forgotten. During the course of research, there are moments in which we sense that we are in crucial moments of learning, and this often occurs through communication with others. The unambiguous transforms into the ambiguous, and ungraspable complexities blossom out into exciting new questions. Curiosity about the world and its inhabitants is a fundamental drive in research. It makes research worthwhile when we feel knowledge is created.[15]

Simultaneously, researchers feel a need to master the research process. As we are no island, we do too, and we too relate unconsciously to culturally embedded norms. In spite of our poststructuralist inclination, we encounter ourselves seeking control over knowledge, seeking the truth or striving for tangible evidence.[16] In the case of collaborative research though, the desire to build a stable framework within which to understand the research topic is an interest shared by everybody involved. All parties aspire for certainty, an opinion, a standpoint. The dilemma we have experienced has to do with, on the one hand, being committed to offer/receive clear answers and results. And on the other, being encouraged by a drive to de-centre and disturb dominant discourses of a field, by posing unusual questions to existing (and naturalized) practices and understandings (Søndergaard 1996: 63-64), aspiring in this way to keep processes of knowledge production fluid.

There is a consensus within the action research tradition that it is action, not awareness which bears further thought (Gudiksen 2004: 23-25). While a social constructionist understands reflection as a social practice, an action research perspective tends to understand practice as practical, physical actions that human beings carry out together. The idea is that change is not driven by awareness; actions are. Kurt Lewin provides the truly radical expression of this thought, holding that one first gets to know a social system when one attempts to alter it. It is then the practice of changing inherently offers awareness of the world's condition (Lewin 1946).

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[15] See Melrose (2001) on how AR can be viewed as a learning process clear.

[16] We actually consider quest for theoretical coherency an illusion, that too often block knowledge production.

It has been our experience that joint acting, and hence joint knowledge production, is easier said than done. Among others, two issues emerge when poststructuralist inspired ways of thinking encounter expectations linked to scientific knowledge production, issues that have to do with the question of who has/takes/receives the power to define and delimit what should be considered useful knowledge, and how does power unfold in processes where decisions about what should be done are taken . These two questions are, naturally, intrinsically connected. In our projects, we encountered epistemologies with which we had no desire to get involved, and we experienced that the various understandings of knowledge/science created opacity of intent and even disagreement, both between the researchers and the field and between the field's participants. Quite simply, there were times during the process when we found ourselves in the middle of fire fights between ourselves and some practitioners, because the practitioners held what we then considered a far too traditional understanding of a researcher's position, and of the division of labour between us and them.

Our ideals were indeed informed by ideas about joint knowledge production, but fixed notions of tangibility and applicable results often triumphed our need for reflections about knowledge production, and the experimentation with new practices through which we could produce knowledge. It also turned out that participants among themselves held widely-divergent ideas of what sort of knowledge was most relevant. The difficulties we encountered in attempting to put our ideals into action in the real world will become clear below, where we use examples from our two projects to show how the involved parties – both researchers and the other practitioners – expressed and acted upon different epistemologies.

Challenging notions of knowledge production

In a meeting with both the working group and the steering committee at the psychiatric ward, the type of knowledge production that Birgitte found relevant and forward-looking was strenuously challenged. It was on the basis of many discussions with the project group, Birgitte surmised that the local practitioners went into the project with two particular expectations of the task

of researchers: Namely, that they could contribute through their production of knowledge[17] and they could contribute to sparking change in the ward's practice.

The practitioners' prior experience with research and development projects suggested to them that they would be asked to execute a number of additional assignments (weigh, measure, enquire, etc.) and register this new data. In other words, they expected project assignments that were more or less additions to their existing work assignments situated within a 'medical evidence-based research horizon. This concept of research, so steeped in the tenets of positivism, has an impact on perceptions of the usefulness of other types of research. There are many problems tied up with a positivist approach to research, and this is not the place to consider them all. Nevertheless, it was striking that, within the field of "education of patients", there was a widespread practice to measure variables while assuming that all other conditions, like for example the context of the study would remain static and untouched over time. After a relatively-short amount of time working within the psychiatric field, Birgitte had acquired the impression of a field undergoing rapid, continuous change at all levels (professionally, structurally, organisational culturally, economically, relationally, etc.). These changes, understood as context, proved to be significantly influencing the focus of the study, namely 'education of patients' and the route of the project.

As suggested, the practitioners' expectations towards the researchers were conflicting. On the one hand, it was felt that the researchers should perform 'doing research' on the basis of familiar premises. On the other hand, it was very much hoped that they would be able to introduce positive changes into the existing practices, hence altering existing work conditions, so long as the project's demands did not disturb or ask too much of the participants. Birgitte sensed that, already early on in process, the local practitioners expected something special, because the researchers had been preparing the ground for a collaborative and self-reflective praxis that had situated organisational

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[17] Over the past years, there has been increasing awareness within the hospital sector that employees produce research results without being offered additional resources for this sort of activity.

change and communication in the centre of the research project. They entered the project friendly, expectative and open-minded: What, they wondered, would the researchers come up with, which we would find time to test or implement?

At a series of introductory meetings with the working group, the practitioners asked the researchers what they had in mind. For example, when the researchers talked about a research approach that should depart from employees' and patients' experiences and expectations in relation to the giving and receiving of information about psychological illness, the practitioners felt surprised and insecure about what such an approach would implicate. The practitioners had difficulty believing that such a direction would produce the kind of results that would qualify as 'genuine' research. They found it extremely provocative that the researchers used the time in these meetings to turn the question around and ask what the practitioners felt should be the result of the collaboration, thus providing the foundations for joint knowledge production. Bjørn Gustavsen suggests that positivist research ideals force researchers into individualistic roles, and that "each researcher is brought to see him- or herself as a complete rational subject capable, as an individual, of understanding the world" (Gustavsen 2003: 159). We would add that positivist knowledge ideals do work in many situations as quite active quality parameters also in the practices of researchers, due to our own situatedness in Western culture.

It subsequently became clear that neither Birgitte nor her research assistant would or could contribute to the sort of research that is traditionally prestigious and practiced within the medical field. The local practitioners seemed to require objectivity, distance, and control, whereas the researchers revered jointly produced criteria arguing for relevance, dialogue, and change as well as joint validation criteria concerning the practical usefulness of the results.

We view this discussion as an expression of negotiations concerning the nature of science itself. In this negotiation, the researchers were challenged to lay bare their epistemological position; a poststructuralist understanding of knowledge as multi-perspective. This understanding of research results challenges everyday understandings of knowledge, and can easily be inter-

preted as useless. But we should, as Patti Lather puts it, avoid thinking that "if we cannot know everything, then we can know nothing" (Lather 1991: 116). This understanding of knowledge as fragmented, relational and situational was precisely the understanding of knowledge that the researchers attempted to communicate to the local practitioners, and that resulted in a combination of expectative scepticism and curious interest.

We argue that the joint constructions of relevance among all parties in the research process are worth struggling for. Research is, as we see it, only valuable if it also is appreciated by persons outside our own academic circles. It is necessary to take into account alternative modes of understanding and/or acting, in relation to the issues relevant to everyday lives of different sectors of the population. We recognise that other researchers bear an interest in understanding a field for the mere sake of understanding, but this aspiration somehow leaves us flat. We feel that useful knowledge grows out of interferences with practice, for example, by introducing disturbing discourses or new means of altering structures and processes. It is our position that such disturbances only arises if conditions are produced as to make it possible for practitioners in any given field to connect with the interference produced in the research process. At the same time, the practitioners from a practice field might introduce perspectives that interfere with the logics of the researchers. A precondition for such a dynamic is that what is introduced is recognisable and comprehensible, while simultaneously holding something different and unknown, something that requires us to understand in new ways what has previously been taken for granted.[18] To produce a sense of belonging, and to create mutual trust between participants, is central in such an endeavour and a precondition for such moments of knowledge production to occur.

At various points during the course of both projects, we experienced more or less direct negotiations regarding the types of knowledge that collaborative work ought to produce, and about who would be interested in the generated knowledge. After all, why should the participants be interested in a decon-

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[18] Chandler and Torbert introduce the concepts of single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback in relation to a first-person Awareness, a second-person Conversation, and a third-person Organising. They thus seek to encapsulate the entire span of research-practice relations (Chandler/Torbert 2003).

struction of the field's own practices and epistemologies? And what use could they make of interference with their own understandings of relevance in a situation where they – and not the researchers – possessed intimate knowledge about the organisation?

In the project on gender and organisations, Christina once asked the dialogue group to participate in the analysis of the data that had been produced. She worked hard to try to 'translate' her own theoretical perspective on the gender, so she could communicate her understandings of gender clearly and share it with the dialogue group. She invited the group to suggest analytical perspectives to the data she had produced, but quickly became aware, that she should not count on an active participation of the group in this task. The practitioners wanted, they said, to define the extent of their participation and they expected the researchers, not them, to be the producers of analytical knowledge, which they afterwards would make applicable within their home organisations. "We have our work and our assignments, you have yours," was the unambiguous message for Christina. The types of knowledge they most desired were scientific explanations as to why 'all this gender stuff' is so difficult', explanations to why they experienced so much resistance within the organisations, examples of 'best gender practices' to introduce to colleagues, and the type of personal strategies Christina would recommend so to experience success working from within a gendered perspective? In other words, they wanted to know what worked and how they should modify their actions. They desired answers as unequivocally produced, in a spirit of a clear work division far from the idealistic participatory spirit in which Christina had imagined the joint knowledge production.

We introduced this section by asking to what extent it is possible to bridge the logics of different systems, and what sort of knowledge can be generated if a bridging is successful. A central assumption in our projects has been that theoretical, experiential, and practical knowledge possessed by researchers and practitioners working collaboratively can help improve practice and strengthen relationships. Moreover, we have experienced that this collaboration must occur in open communication which includes a willingness to step into the unpredictable together.

Despite the difficulties described, the participants' physical presence as participating subjects was of great importance for the exploration of gendered meanings in aid organisations that Christina's project studied. It was, for example, the participants' approaches, their questions, their means of confrontation, and their pre-existing perspectives that inspired Christina's subsequent choice of analytical foci in the project. She discovered these new aspects together with the other participants, and later on she introduced these discussions and points to other practitioners from the field. Even though it cannot be said that joint production of knowledge took place, it would be equally erroneous to state that this was a solely researcher-defined analysis. There are central topics of analysis that Christina would not have noticed had there not been so many people and so much interaction planned into the project design. Birgitte can readily agree with these conclusions. Concurrently, she senses that if she had not taken in the knowledge of the practitioners during the time of collaboration, she would never have succeeded in actually introducing new methods and procedures for teaching patients and relatives at the psychiatric ward.

To Continue ..

Action research is change oriented in intent. It is ultimately about collective action aimed at transforming social structures, and challenging practices that unjust constrain social/economic opportunity or oppress specific social groups, as formulated by Kondrat and Júlia (1997).

We have in this text taken up just a small set of dilemmas in collaborative inquiry in the complex and fascinating practices of an action researcher. We have argued that taking on a first person perspective has the potential of deconstructing systematically constraining meaning making processes, making them subject to critical collective reflection. In our own research practice, we would like to continue developing systematic procedures connected to a first person perspective (not only that of the researcher) based on communication, as we consider it a viable way of construing and practising knowledge production as a collective activity taking place in a specific historical context. The proposed fusion' of post-structuralist, mostly feminist,

research approaches and action research is based on a premise that both the creation of knowledge and the creation of relations during a research process is capable of both changing and strengthening collective and individual constructions of identities, as well as the formulation of visions for future action in a social field.

The experience of individuals as an entry point for dialogue among many, in the spirit of caring, daring, and sharing, should then also be considered a productive springboard from which the formation of theory can take place. Experiences with a systematic criss-cross movement between the 'I' and the 'We' open up possibilities of creating new knowledge about how we make sense of human lives in our world today.

Lorde (1984) states that silence/inarticulateness is a major obstacle to emancipation. With action research in our hearts we claim that the creation of collective, rather than individual thinking technologies has a potential of generating passion, inspiration, consciousness and political action in processes of analysis and mutual learning. Our central argument for suggesting taking on a first person perspective is the development of collective thinking methodologies, through processes of dialogue that contain the potential of enlightening and qualifying both research relations and knowledge production.

While bringing to the table dilemmas experienced from a first person perspective and from a specific subject position, effects of processes of legitimacy and social recognition present themselves in a rather embodied manner, while discussions with the other participants in an action research project are opened up. The effort to bring forward meanings of the dilemmas related to notions of relationship and knowledge, – ideas about what is considered 'good and bad' – touch the normative borders produced by concerned fields of practice.

Bringing also into the dialogue dilemmas and contradictions the researcher as yet another participating subject could inspire learning processes about boundary crossing, about power and about the importance of breaking silences: "The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not differences which immobilize us, but silence. And there are so many

silences to be broken" (Lorde 1984: 275). And, would we add, so many reflections to be opened.

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